

Greg and Amy Whitsett

Thai Contextualized Art

Art is central to religious experience in Buddhist cultures. Scenes from the former lives of the Buddha adorn temple ceilings and walls. Murals depicting heaven and hell serve to keep the teachings before the faithful who come to worship and meditate. Some paintings are rather basic. Others are intricate and detailed. But all serve a purpose: to teach and remind through painted story.

In the 1980s, a set of four murals depicting four specific and unique Adventist teachings and beliefs was commissioned by Pastor Clifton Maberly who was serving as a missionary in Thailand. His goal was to have these events depicted in a medium familiar to local Thai buddhists so they could wrestle with the new concepts without being distracted by Western art styles. His hope was that if Jesus, Satan and the angels could be depicted using characters similar to those already familiar to the Thai, the viewer would be better able to focus on and understand the truth portrayed in the paintings—the story of the Great Controversy.

After discussing the project with the artist, it was decided to use the familiar Lanna art style. The artist's contribution to the storytelling was massive as he tried to be faithful to the biblical descriptions and also to the aesthetics of narrative art. These four paintings are the works of an artist wrestling to bring together literary descriptions from a range of texts and expressing them in a detail demanding artistic form.

Four years after beginning the project, the paintings were completed and became the subject of much discussion with and by Buddhist scholars and leaders about the use of popular culture for the transmission of religious ideas, as well as for heated discussions about contextualization and the ethics of borrowing art cross-culturally. Perhaps more importantly, however, the paintings were the vehicle for transmission of the Adventist view of the end of earth's history and the transition into eternity.

Today, we are thankful to once again have these paintings coming back to the public. After being stored for a number of years, the Global Mission Center for East Asian Religions recently acquired them and had them professionally cleaned, restored, and digitized. The four original paintings are now on display at Asia-Pacific International University in Muak Lek, Thailand.



Painting 1

The first of the four painting begins with a depiction of the withdrawal of the Holy Spirit and restraining protection of the angels. The artist chose to portray this as a period of darkness with the beginning events taking place inside the mouth of ‘the dragon.’ The world is shown descending into chaos, accelerated by seven last plagues poured out by seven angels while the unrighteous curse God for their troubles.

Occurring simultaneously, but separated from the accelerating chaos (visually separated by a jagged divider), the righteous experience Jacob’s trouble. While they are protected from the chaos and are nurtured by angels, their faces reflect their spiritual anxiety. Then as the unrighteous focus their anger on the people of God, angels that excel in strength defend the righteous, breaking their weapons.

On the far right side of the painting a dark cloud ‘the size of a man’s hand’ expands to form a tunnel-like connection between the world of light (heaven) and the world descending into darkness (earth). The rescuing army led by a rider on the white horse appears travelling to the earth, depicted with all the signs John describes in Revelation 19. Heavenly angels are shown sweeping down to assist the living and risen righteous as they join the rescuing host ‘in the air.’ As this happens, the unrighteous flee and seek shelter in the dark mountains. Birds of prey circle overhead, indicating the end of human life on earth.



Painting 2

This is the second of four paintings and depicts events of the millennium, divided into two scenes: heaven separated from earth. The division is marked not merely by a barrier but by a closed gate reinforced with chains. On earth the Dragon from the bottomless pit roams the devastated earth with his minions. As fallen beings their state and relations are not genial and they turn on each other.

The righteous, upon their arrival in heaven, receive crowns, worship with music and bear flags of victory. Angels are shown moving among the redeemed sharing the records and inviting full scrutiny of the decisions made.

The center of the process is dominated by two Beings on the central throne — Jesus and One unable to be described. In the foreground are the seven flames of the Spirit, and surrounding the throne are the representatives of other worlds — the lion, eagle, bovine and humanoid creatures. All are visibly impressed by the justice and majesty of the Triune God and worship Him.

In the background, the future home of the redeemed is shown still under construction. The tree of life is sprouting across the stream that will become the river of life. The redeemed are sustained in heaven, which is not intended to be their permanent home.



Painting 3

The third of the four painting series takes most of its imagery from the Great Controversy chapter: “The Controversy Ended” and depicts the final destruction of the wicked.

As the New Jerusalem descends, Jesus is depicted sitting in judgement with the law in one hand and a sickle in the other. The unrighteous dead are raised to life and are rallied by demons to join an attack to take the descending New Jerusalem. The cloak that previously hid the invisible world had lifted and now men and demons unite together. Satan (depicted in black) rides a battle elephant and leads the charge against Jesus and the New Jerusalem. The artist included animals in the scene of battle as they are essential to the battle scenes of the Lanna style. To emphasize the symbolic nature of the illustration, he included mythical beasts as well—with humans riding mythical beasts and demons riding natural beasts. Again, the unrighteous are depicted in darkness while Jesus and the redeemed are enveloped in light.

The reading of the names from the book of life; the humble adoration of the saints; the panorama of the efforts of Christ to save them all; the bowing acknowledgement of all creatures; and the subsequent final crowning of Christ follow in succession. The punishing fire from heaven engulfs the unredeemable, and on the extreme left of the painting nothing remains but the cleansing fire.



Greg and Amy direct the Global Mission Center for East Asian Religions. They are thrilled to draw from their 16 years of mission experience to provide trainings, coach indigenous church planters, and develop resources to help our church better understand and address the unique cultural understandings and needs of peoples with Buddhist-shaped worldviews. They have recently relocated to the United States to be closer to their teenaged sons as they transition to adulthood.



Painting 4

The fourth and last painting depicts the New Earth. Taken from various prophecies as well as inspiration from Ellen White's writings, notable elements include: a moon but no sun, the tree of life, the river of life flowing from the throne, and people involved in all the activities of a community within the conceptual time frame of the art tradition (Lanna kingdom). Everywhere are small surprises depicting a community in harmony with each other and the natural world. While angels can be seen busy with their supporting roles, it is essentially a human world. It is a real earth redeemed.

God is also shown dwelling with his people. In one scene he is teaching as people and beasts worship. His 'home' is present and his throne is empty. On stands bedside the throne are the masks God wore when relating to yet unredeemed people of earth—the mask of the lion and the mask of the lamb. But the masks are now on stands, unneeded, as God lives with his people.

Central to the artist's ideal earth are two images: one of the nations bringing gifts of praise to the center of the city, and a beautiful *sala* representing the unity of all flesh in their adoration:

People will come here from the towns in Judah, from the villages surrounding Jerusalem, from the territory of Benjamin, from the western foothills, from the southern hill country, and from the southern part of Judah. They will come bringing offerings to the temple of the Lord: burnt offerings, sacrifices, grain offerings, and incense along with their thank offerings. (From Jeremiah 17)

The artist suggested that the central *sala* also depicts the function and meaning of the Sabbath—rest from all care, and grateful worship of God.

This painting is bordered with a golden decorative border to indicate that it is a vision of the ideal—never before realized, but the hope of the nations.